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Horizons of Grace in Marilynne Robinson and Simone Weil

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HORIZONS OF GRACE:
MARILYNNE ROBINSON AND SIMONE WEIL

The sorrow is that every soul is put out of house.
Marilynne Robinson

All of us, even the youngest, are in a situation
like Socrates’ when he was awaiting death in prison
and learning to play the lyre.
Simone Weil

Marilynne Robinson’s first novel Housekeeping (1980) is a
meditative and lyrical reflection on old themes: abandonment,
loss, grief, renewal, hope, memory—what the narrator Ruth Stone calls
the “sad and outcast state of revelation” (p. 184). The novel returns in
its opening pages to the suicide of Ruth’s mother, Helen, and con-
cludes with a bridge crossing, misinterpreted by other characters as
intentional death. Critical responses to the novel usefully explore its
nineteenth-century American literary impulses (Emerson, Thoreau,
Dickinson, Melville), its reworking of female subjectivity, its quiet
insistence on the transience of all things and the unmaking of bound-
aries. Words on suicide are scarce. In this inattention, critics may be
following the lead of the novel, which, among novels containing acts of
self-destruction, is exceptional in its almost total reticence on the
subject. Not one character asks why Helen kills herself, and little
emerges from the narrative to shed light on the unasked question.

Structurally, the function of the mother’s suicide seems obvious.
Helen’s death creates two orphans—that preferred status in literature
that frees characters up for adventure and self-discovery. It also appears
to be the cause, or at least a leading cause, of Ruth’s sadness. Ruth’s
aunt Sylvie assumes this to be true. After the deaths of their mother and
grandmother, Ruth and her sister Lucille are passed off by their overwhelmed great aunts to Sylvie, a woman who has been wandering the country, hopping trains, getting by. When the concerned women in the town of Fingerbone attempt to determine how best to keep Ruth from following in Sylvie’s uncivil footsteps, to keep her “safely within doors” one of them remarks on how sad Ruth always looks.

And Sylvie replied, “Well, she is sad.”
Silence.
Sylvie said, “She should be sad.” She laughed. “I don’t mean she should be, but, you know, who wouldn’t be?”
Again, silence. (p. 185)

The unsaid is met with repeated silence. Sylvie proposes that anyone who had survived what Ruth has survived, understood to be her mother’s death, would be sad, should be sad. A long silence also greets Sylvie’s disquieting observation that Ruth is “like another sister to me. She’s her mother all over again” (p. 182).

The generating absence of the mother sets the stage for Ruth’s spiritual exile and eventual communion, the moment when a “word so true” comes home to her. Ruth does not, in fact, become “her mother all over again.” Born of people falling to their deaths (Ruth’s mother and grandfather),*Housekeeping* ends with a counter-image, an image of crossing over a bridge (horizontality) rather than falling from it (verticallity). One way to think about the philosophical movement in the novel is provided by Simone Weil’s writing, which relies of tropes of gravity. I am particularly interested in connections between *Housekeeping* and Simone Weil’s *Gravity and Grace* (1952) and *Waiting for God* (1992). These texts explore the nature of suffering by focusing on the inevitability of waiting, the practice of attention, and the necessity of detachment.

Although Weil wrote movingly and persuasively about industrial labor, war, and other forms of political oppression, here I emphasize her spiritual writings. In his introduction to *First and Last Notebooks*, Richard Rees writes of Weil, “One may say that two of her chief preoccupations were, first, how to organize a society so that suffering should be reduced to a minimum, and, second, how to ensure that the (large) irreducible minimum should not be valueless” (p. viii). *Housekeeping* dramatizes this second concern. The novel also provides a needed fictional example of decreation, Weil’s difficult name for the
process by which something created can be transformed into something uncreated, or “the act of allowing moments empty of meaning to remain ‘unfilled.’” The suicide of Helen, which puts pressure on Ruth to “unfill” a terrible void, not only provides the dramatic situation for a coming-of-age story, but also creates an atmosphere charged with questions about what constitutes choice, responsibility, and reality.

After a day spent on an island in the lake of Fingerbone (and not, for Ruth, spent in school), Ruth and Sylvie wait in a “borrowed” boat for a train to rage across the bridge above their heads. It is near midnight. Sylvie falls asleep, and Ruth explains, “I hated waiting. If I had one particular complaint, it was that my life seemed composed entirely of expectation. I expected—an arrival, an explanation, an apology” (p. 166). This last sentence summarizes the pained suspension of Robinson’s novel, as well as Waiting for Godot. Like that of Beckett’s clowns, Ruth’s need for an arrival, an explanation, an apology, is both specific and general. Specifically, it proceeds from the day her mother left Ruth and Lucille on their grandmother’s porch with graham crackers telling them “to wait quietly. Then she went back to the car and drove north almost to Tyler, where she sailed in Bernice’s Ford from the top of a cliff named Whiskey Rock into the blackest depth of the lake” (p. 22). Helen dies in the lake where her own father had earlier drowned when a train derailed from the bridge. While the circumstances of Ruth’s needful expectation are, in one sense, quite particular, she recognizes hers as the “common experience.” Toward the end of her narrative, Ruth confronts “the matter” directly:

Then there is the matter of my mother’s abandonment of me. Again, this is the common experience. They walk ahead of us, and walk too fast, and disappear. The only mystery is that we expect it to be otherwise. (p. 215)

“The only mystery” is the expectation—that we will be held close, soothed, loved simply and forever, that the ordinary will not veer into the catastrophic, that we will not have to wait, and be alone, at least not for long.

The scene of waiting in the boat corresponds with other moments of suspension in the novel—Ruth and Lucille waiting for their mother at their grandmother’s house, Ruth waiting for Sylvie to reappear at the abandoned home on the island, Ruth waiting in daydreams for her mother “confidently, as I had all those years ago when she left us in the porch. Such confidence was like a sense of imminent presence, a
palpable displacement, the movement in the air before the wind comes” (p. 121). And the novel concludes with Ruth imagining Lucille in Boston not waiting, and always, for Sylvie and Ruth. *Housekeeping* returns over and over to this existential predicament of loss, one that Weil saw as central to the human experience. She compared it to the fates of both Electra, who had to wait for Orestes’s return and for justice,5 and Ulysses, who did not wait but journeyed for home: “We feel ourselves to be outsiders, uprooted, in exile here below. We are like Ulysses who had been carried away during his sleep by sailors and woke in a strange land, longing for Ithaca with a longing that rent his soul” (*Waiting*, p. 178). For Weil, none of us, women nor men, whether waiting or journeying, can avoid loss, no more than we can avoid gravity—“All the horrors produced in this world are like the folds imposed upon the waves by gravity” (*Waiting*, p. 129). Yet, we can determine how we interact with inevitabilities. “Necessity,” she writes in her *Notebooks*, “never involves total impotence” (*Waiting*, p. 420). We cannot choose whether we obey certain laws, only whether or not we desire to obey. Weil, who looked especially to the *Bhagavad-Gita* and Lao-Tse for descriptions of this highest order of obedience (*Waiting*, p. 194), concluded that such desire can be achieved only through sustained attention.

*Housekeeping* follows Ruth as she learns through necessity this kind of spiritual attention. While Lucille aligns herself with the established order of Fingerbone, Ruth gravitates toward Sylvie, eventually following her across elevated train tracks into a wandering life. Each sister takes with her a different version of their mother. According to Lucille, Helen was “orderly, vigorous, and sensible, a widow” (p. 109). By renovating her image to fit in with the popular girls at school and by deciding to live not with Sylvie but with her Home Economics teacher, Lucille becomes a version of her imagined mother: “orderly, vigorous, and sensible.” Ruth recalls a less stable mother. She remembers a day in a park with her mother, eating hamburgers and listening to the horns of passing ferries: “My mother was happy that day, we did not know why. And if she was sad the next, we did not know why. And if she was gone the next, we did not know why” (p. 213). Her mother’s suicide is not the source but the continuation of an enigma. Ruth sees their mother as “the abandoner, and not the one abandoned” (p. 109). That is, her mother had made a choice.

Ghosted by images as a child, Ruth recalls how her mother “almost slipped through any door I saw from the side of my eye, and it was she,
and not changed, and not perished. She was a music I no longer heard, that rang in my mind, itself and nothing else, lost to all sense, but not perished, not perished” (p. 160). Although her mother was “lost to all sense,” Ruth knows that sense is an unreliable means of apprehending reality. She describes herself and Lucille after their mother’s death as “children lost in the dark. It seemed that we were bewilderingly lost in a landscape that, with any light at all, would be wholly familiar. What to make of sounds and shapes, and where to put our feet. So little fell upon our senses, and all of that was suspect” (p. 130). The influence of Emerson, who wrote in “Experience” that perception creates the horizon, is obvious in passages that describe Ruth’s grappling with the flux and flow of images and surfaces: “Everything that falls upon the eye is apparition, a sheet dropped over the world’s true workings. The nerves and the brain are tricked” (p. 116). Ruth’s narrative is largely an analysis of this trick and the need to attend closely to “the world’s true workings.”

So, exactly what kind of loss has Ruth experienced? She suspects she may have been twice deceived, in dream and in reality, though to varying degrees. She offers this logic:

Perhaps I had been deceived. If appearance is only a trick of the nerves, and apparition is only a lesser trick of the nerves, a less perfect illusion, then this expectation [of her mother’s return], this sense of a presence unperceived, was not particularly illusory as things in this world go. The thought comforted me. By so much was my dream less false than Lucille’s. And it is probably as well to be undeceived, though perhaps it is not. (p. 122)

Her unresolved ambivalence in the end—“though perhaps it is not”—does not cause her alarm or provoke despair. With her characteristic “perhaps,” Ruth accepts both the possibility and the uncertainty of (re)appearance, quietly concluding, “It seemed to me that what perished need not also be lost” (p. 124).

As a neo-Platonist, writer, and teacher, Weil was rigorous in her attempt to discern what is real and what is imaginary. She was impatient with the imagination, which she saw as an impediment to a direct encounter with reality. She asks, “How can we distinguish the imagination from the real in the spiritual realm? We must prefer real hell to an imaginary paradise” (Gravity, p. 101). This did not prevent Weil from seeing that the realm of the imaginary has real consequences. “Strictly speaking,” Weil writes, “time does not exist (except within the limit of
the present), yet we have to submit to it. Such is our condition. We are subject to that which does not exist” (Gravity, p. 100). Weil describes a similar process with regard to death, a metaphysical truth that reverberates throughout Housekeeping:

To lose someone: We suffer because the departed, the absent, has become something imaginary and unreal. But our desire for him is not imaginary. We have to go down into ourselves to the abode of the desire which is not imaginary. Hunger: We imagine kinds of food, but the hunger itself is real; we have to fasten onto the hunger. The presence of the dead person is imaginary, but his absence is very real; henceforward it is his way of appearing. (Gravity, p. 68)

Such imaginary, felt presence, or hunger, compels Ruth’s narrative. While neither her desire for her mother nor her submission to time is imaginary (if we can say this about a fiction), she suffers from both. Ruth knows about, in Weil’s words, “passively borne duration”: she knows about waiting.

In only seeming contrast to her active and radical stance as a labor organizer, factory worker, unorthodox teacher, resistance fighter, and political activist,7 Weil insisted on passivity in the spiritual realm, or what she called “passive activity.” Convinced that one must develop the capacity to wait, attentively, in order to realize the transcendent through a finite body, Weil affirmed the need “to detach our desire from all good things and to wait. Experience proves that this waiting is satisfied. It is then we touch the absolute good” (Gravity, p. 58). Michael Ferber points out that the French word, attendre (“to wait”), shares an etymological connection with “attention.”8 To wait is to attend. Weil believed that attention (not will) and grace (not virtue) allow for revelation. (The minister-narrator of Robinson’s second novel, Gilead (2005), also stresses the transformative power of attention and grace.) For Weil, one must be emptied and waiting, receptive to the object, rather than grasping and desiring. “What could be more stupid,” Weil asks, “than to tighten up our muscles and set our jaws about virtue, or poetry, or the solution of a problem. Attention is something quite different” (Gravity, p. 169). If one attains true, full attention, Weil writes, “the ‘I’ disappears”: “I have to deprive all that I call ‘I’ of the light of my attention and turn it on to that which cannot be conceived” (Gravity, pp. 171–72). For Weil, that which cannot be conceived is God; for Ruth, it is a mother who never returned.9
Ruth seeks to recover what has perished by revivifying the past, attending to possibilities rather than perceptions. As Kristin King notes, “it is her longing for impossible restoration that fuels the narrative.”\textsuperscript{10} Ruth counters the finality of death with images of resurrection. In one example, Ruth remembers her discovery of a shoebox in her grandmother’s chest of drawers. It contains page two of a brochure filled with pictures of rural poverty in Honan Province. Ruth connects this brochure with her aunt Molly, who left home to work as a bookkeeper in a missionary hospital. Ruth remarks, “This document explained my aunt Molly’s departure to my whole satisfaction” (p. 91). Unlike her mother’s inexplicable departure, Molly’s can be explained: it was a Christ-like enterprise. Ruth dispatches with the job of bookkeeper and envisions her aunt as a fisherwoman:

Even now I always imagine her leaning from the low side of some small boat, dropping her net through the spumy billows of the upper air. Her net would sweep the turning world unremarked as a wind in the grass, and when she began to pull it in, perhaps in a pell-mell ascension of formal gentlemen and thin pigs and old women and odd socks that would astonish this lower world, she would gather the net, so easily, until the very burden itself lay all in a heap just under the surface. (p. 91)

Drawn toward images of redemption and “pell-mell ascension” (perhaps, she tells us, drawn toward them because she has watched gulls sail, gnats rise, and leaves caught in the wind, but also, we know, drawn toward them because these images reverse gravity, reverse the fatal falls in her family), Ruth concludes that if Molly’s net “swept the whole floor of heaven, it must, finally, sweep the black floor of Fingerbone, too,” resurrecting all the drowned (p. 91). This is Ruth’s (and Weil’s) sustaining hope: comprehension, wholeness, return.

Ruth rewrites natural law in a way that paradoxically accords with Weil’s description of the supernatural necessity that follows obedience—paradoxically, because Ruth exploits the imagination, which Weil distrusted. Miles summarizes, “What is dangerous about the imagination [for Weil] is its power to prevent the mind from encountering head on the notion of the limit. The imagination tends to consecrate, sanctify and privatize experience” (p. 38). I want to connect this to an observation about \textit{Housekeeping} made by Thomas Schaub, who suggests that critics, in their enthusiasm, have failed to acknowledge the novel’s “radically \textit{private}” terrain. Schaub indicts specifically feminist
and Marxist readings for transforming “the account of a girl’s grief into fables of liberation.” Schaub points out that in contrast to contemporary US American writers, like Doctorow, Delillo, and Pynchon, whose works are stocked with concrete historical references, Robinson includes few markers to time and place. Schaub rather aligns Robinson’s novel with Northrop Frye’s idea that imaginative literature should exist “clear of the bondage of history” and suggests, “Ruth’s voice is the representation of a self that transcends history—or stands outside of—(or is meant to be such)” (p. 304).

The language of *Housekeeping* is intensely private—relying on what Robinson calls the “signature quality” of Ruth’s mind—but it is also strategically public, borrowing extensively from nineteenth-century American literature and the Bible, and clearly set, as Schaub acknowledges, in the post-Depression Northwest. Most importantly with regard to Weil’s concerns, Ruth’s imaginings do not overwhelm her grasp of reality, nor the stark consequences of her mother’s suicide. By seeing her mother as the “abandoner and not the one abandoned,” Ruth chooses real hell over an imaginary paradise. Even her daydreams are painfully real. “Imagine,” she says, “that my mother had come back that Sunday, say in the evening” (p. 195). Ruth does not imagine the possibility of a different, happier mother but simply assumes that had her mother returned, it would have meant the nondisclosure of the “nature and reach of her sorrow.” Her mother “would have remained untransfigured. We would have known nothing of the nature and reach of her sorrow if she had come back. But she left us and broke the family and the sorrow was released and we saw its wings and saw it fly a thousand ways into the hills” (p. 198). As it is, Ruth cannot delude herself, not even in her imagination.

On their excursion to the island, Sylvie disappears “without a word” while Ruth is admiring the grass, trees, light. Left alone, again, to contemplate “the appearance of relative solidity” in the world (p. 158), Ruth confronts the difficulty of maintaining a balance between need and detachment, between being fully present to the moment and aware that the present is always changing. Cold and cursing Sylvie in her heart, Ruth tries to make a fire. As she tears old loose planks from the cellar hole, her thoughts move from her grandmother’s seemingly stable house (“It was an impression created by the piano, and the scrolled couch, and the bookcases full of almanacs and Kipling and
Defoe,” pp. 158–59) to an imagined smaller house, perhaps less given to illusion. Ruth finally decides, “It is better to have nothing, for at last even our bones will fall. It is better to have nothing” (p. 159). (Weil conveys a similar thought in these paradoxical terms: “We only possess what we renounce” [Gravity, p. 80]). Ruth then offers up her extraordinary prayer, “Let them come unhouse me of this flesh, and pry this house apart. It was no shelter now” (p. 159). In this moment of fear and loss, Ruth wishes for her mother whom she would not need to touch, simply see. Again Ruth is clear in her thinking: “There was no more the stoop of her high shoulders. The lake had taken that, I knew” (p. 159). When Sylvie reappears, her hand on Ruth’s back, Sylvie wraps Ruth in her coat. Ruth is angry, and grateful: “I was angry that she had left me for so long, and that she did not ask pardon or explain, and that by abandoning me she assumed the power to bestow such a richness of grace. For in fact I wore her coat like beatitude, and her arms around me were as heartening as mercy” (p. 161). Sylvie returns, but every return now carries with it the intimation of its opposite.

In the boat on the way home, Ruth begins to wonder if the “faceless shape” in front of her in the boat could be her mother. She calls, “Sylvie!” (p. 167). Characteristically Sylvie does not reply. Ruth asks again.

“Helen,” I whispered, but she did not reply.

Then the bridge began to rumble and shake as if it would fall. Shock banged and pounded in every joint. I saw a light pass over my head like a meteor, and then I smelled hot, foul, black oil and heard the gnash of wheels along the rails. It was a very long train. (p. 167)

Instead of a response from Sylvie (or her mother), Ruth hears from the train, a loaded symbol of death and escape that connects to her past and future. When Sylvie does speak, her voice is drowned in the train’s rumble.

Ruth learns to live outside, and not only metaphorically; she discovers an atman-like indistinction between object and subject. One night she and Lucille remain in the woods, having lost track of time while eating fish and huckleberries. They make a shelter of driftwood, stone, and fir limbs, their “ruined stronghold.” Lucille would say that Ruth fell asleep, but Ruth stipulates, “I simply let the darkness in the sky become coextensive with the darkness in my skull and bowels and bones (p. 116). This experience of the “coextensive” was introduced to Ruth by
her grandmother: “When we were children and frightened of the dark, my grandmother used to say if we kept our eyes closed we would not see it. That was when I noticed the correspondence between the space within the circle of my skull and the space around me” (p. 198). Once Ruth attends to this merging of an “I” and darkness, she is able to sleep.

On their last night in Fingerbone, Ruth playfully hides from Sylvie in the woods and further realizes the body’s capacity for transformation: “I learned an important thing in the orchard that night, which was that if you do not resist the cold, but simply relax and accept it, you no longer feel the cold as discomfort” (p. 204). Ruth learns the physical corollary of Weil’s observation that it is counterproductive to “tighten up our muscles and set our jaws” when faced with a social/psychological challenge. Ruth suspects there were many other lessons for her—about hunger and darkness: “I could feel that I was breaking the tethers of need, one by one. But then the sheriff came” (p. 204). Ruth’s apprenticeship in waiting and detachment is interrupted by the regretful official, and Sylvie and Ruth’s fiery departure is assured: “Now truly we were cast out to wander, and there was an end to housekeeping” (p. 209).

In the novel’s conclusion, suicide returns, but as a misreading, a misperception. When it becomes clear that a judge will likely separate them because of Sylvie’s unconventional ways, Ruth and Sylvie make their night escape across the tracks. The following day, the townspeople assume they have killed themselves. Ruth agrees that the lake “claimed” them and notes that the house would now be Lucille’s “since we are dead” (pp. 217–18). There is some seriousness to these comments since Ruth considers the crossing as the end of one part of her life: “When did I become so unlike other people?” she asks. “Either it was when I followed Sylvie across the bridge, and the lake claimed us, or it was when my mother left me waiting for her, and established in me the habit of waiting and expectation which makes any present moment most significant for what it does not contain. Or it was at my conception” (p. 214). The next three paragraphs move backward through this list, considering each possibility in detail.

First, Ruth considers the “scandal” of conception: “Of my conception I know only what you know about yours. It occurred in darkness and I was unconsenting” (p. 214). “Thrown into the world,” as Heidegger understood, Ruth contemplates the horizon of her unbeing and the impossibility of return: “By some bleak alchemy what had been mere unbeing becomes death when life is mingled with it. So they seal the
door against our returning” (p. 215). She casts her beginning as unexceptional: what I know, you know: it was not a choice. Secondly, there was her mother’s abandonment, which she also refers to as the “common experience” and therefore unsatisfactory as an explanation for her difference.

Ruth concludes that the walk across the bridge was the decisive moment: “I believe it was the crossing of the bridge that changed me finally” (p. 215). King casts Ruth’s conclusion in psychoanalytic terms: “The choice between conception and abandonment as mutually exclusive sites of difference makes way for a description of the crossing as a journey of resistance to either extreme, an escape not from Fingerbone but from the binary structure she herself establishes to describe her difference” (p. 576). The problem with this analysis is that for Ruth conception and abandonment are not “mutually exclusive sites of difference.” Ruth makes clear that conception is a kind of abandonment, to the world, and always done without consent. Crossing the bridge emerges as the decisive moment because it is the only one of the three that involves Ruth making a choice. Weil’s ethics demand action as well as contemplation, a turning toward the real that facilitates coming out of the theatre of shadows and illusions. In the Notebooks, Weil writes, “one is never got out of the cave, one comes out of it” (p. 36).

The description of the bridge-crossing resonates with Weil’s emphasis on passivity and receptivity after the choice of a direction has been made. While crossing the tracks, “Something happened.” Ruth does not know if it was simply that they had to “cower and lean” against the wind to avoid falling into the water, or, she wonders, “did we really hear some sound too loud to be heard, some word so true we did not understand it, but merely felt it pour through our nerves like darkness or water?” (p. 215). Here is the novel’s moment of grace, of hearing what cannot be heard, a true and incomprehensible word. Weil borrows from the language of the fall to describe such experiences:

Man escapes from the laws of this world in lightning flashes. Instants when everything stands still, instants of contemplation, of pure intuition, of mental void, of acceptance of the moral void. It is through such instants that he is capable of the supernatural.

Whoever endures a moment of the void either receives the supernatural bread or falls. It is a terrible risk but one that must be run, even during the instant when hope fails. But we must not throw ourselves into it. (Gravity, p. 56)
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Weil reiterates the need for passivity, to refrain from grasping at God, or hope. Escape, or avoiding the fall, can only occur in unasked for “instants.”

Weil believed that grace alone can transform gravity, which represents for her the mechanical laws of the universe. Her writing is stocked with references to verticality, to gravity and to grace. It is impossible, she writes, to “go toward” God; we can only hope for the intervention of grace: “The infinity of time and space separates us from God. How are we to seek for him? How are we to go toward him? Even if we were to walk for hundreds of years, we should do no more than go round and round the world. Even in an airplane we could not do anything else. We are incapable of progressing vertically. We cannot take a step toward the heavens. God crosses the universe and comes to us” (Waiting, pp. 132–33). In his excellent article on Weil’s analysis of the Iliad, Ferber comments on Weil’s use of vertical tropes and what he sees as an inappropriate imputation of the supernatural in her discussion of Homer’s text. Even the Iliad gods, he notes, while on a higher plane in terms of power, are not above human beings in terms of morality.

Now it seems to me that the world of the Iliad is one of the most horizontal worlds imaginable. Homer is everywhere lovingly attentive to details of things and events: to the tides of battle, the techniques of sailing and slaughtering, the skills of the heroes at wrestling and foot racing. What could be more horizontal than a catalog of ships? (p. 77)

To answer a rhetorical question: train tracks. Housekeeping also details a horizontal world in which Ruth’s (vertical) imaginings share a plane with “reality,” dovetail into “plain fact.” Toward the end of the narrative, Ruth admits, “I have never distinguished readily between thinking and dreaming. I know my life would be much different if I could ever say, This I have learned from my senses, while that I have merely imagined” (pp. 215–16).

The crossing of the bridge entails both terror and unearthly comfort, a sense of departure and new connection. Suffering is particularly hard to endure because, Weil insists, God is not clearly manifest in this world. The experience of God is as an abandonment, and we must not delude ourselves with comforting fictions. Weil writes of her beloved classic, the Iliad: “The cry of suffering: ‘Why?’ This rings throughout the Iliad. To explain suffering is to console it; therefore it must not be explained” (Gravity, p. 165). This refusal is also at the center of Housekeeping.
J. Hillis Miller describes tragedy as having to do with this kind of terrible inscrutability. We never know, for example, why Oedipus is punished by Apollo, fated to kill his father and marry his mother. In her insistent and strange way, Weil ascribes a Christian sensibility to the *Iliad*, claiming that only someone close to God could have created it. As Ferber explains, “If we reply that God is conspicuously absent from the *Iliad* we pose no problem for her argument, because in her view God is also conspicuously absent from the world” (p. 65). (In an essay on Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Robinson also refers to this way of thinking about God, quoting Mark 15:34: “The God who is with us is the God who forsakes us.”) The cry of suffering may be less bloody in *Housekeeping* than in the *Iliad* but it is no less present, no less comprehensive. Ruth’s abandonment, like the silence of God, must be endured, or in Weil’s word, obeyed.

“We must take the feeling of being at home into exile,” writes Weil. “We must be rooted in the absence of a place” (*Gravity*, p. 86). Ruth is deeply rooted in absence—the absence of her mother, her sister, the house in Fingerbone. She concludes her narrative imagining Lucille in Boston, nicely dressed in a restaurant, “waiting for a friend” (p. 218). Ruth pictures everything that does not happen in this scene: “Sylvie and I do not flounce in through the door . . . We do not sit down at the table next to hers and empty our pockets . . . My mother, likewise, is not there, and my grandmother in her house slippers with her pigtail wagging, and my grandfather, with his hair combed flat against his brow, does not examine the menu with studious interest. We are nowhere in Boston” (pp. 218–19). Ruth imagines even Lucille’s thoughts “thronged by our absence.” Her sister “does not watch, does not listen, does not wait, does not hope, and always for me and Sylvie” (p. 219).

This ending performs a kind of literary decreation, an unfilling of two voids, the one left by a mother’s sudden disappearance and the one that awaits the end of any imaginative work. Weil offers this definition of decreation: “To make something created pass into something uncreated” (*Gravity*, p. 78). Weil infers the value of this from God’s seeming lack in the world, his refusal to intervene. And she contrasts it with destruction, “a blameworthy substitute,” which means that something created has passed into nothingness (*Gravity*, p. 78). The difference between something uncreated and something destroyed has to do with lingering presence. This presence is also suggested by the novel’s ongoing insistence on the prefix, “un-”: “unremarked,” “unbeing,” “unstrung,” “unsheltered,” “unhoused.” These words contain what is
missing, what is not; they uncreate the wor(l)d. In an insightful analysis of the Emersonian images and domestic space in *Housekeeping*, Tace Hedrick argues that Sylvie and Ruth “drift deliberately, not toward compensation but toward completion, toward un-creation, un-Fall, and a ‘knitting up’ that will never again shatter” (p. 148). That “never” seems optimistic and yet it speaks to the power of perception, a way of seeing unaltered by changing realities. The novel is permanently poised on that horizontal line above water, held in place by gravity and grace.

In contrast to the lengthy list of female characters who kill themselves (Antigone, Ophelia, Lady MacBeth, Juliet, Miss Julie, Hedda Gabler, Emma Bovary, Edna Pontellier, Lily Bart, Thelma and Louise), Robinson gives us Ruth, who chooses to cross the bridge, not jump from it. Ruth forges a path of survival and growth, unconstrained in the end by the conventions of marriage or death. As Paula Geyh writes, “We must continually cross and recross the bridge in both directions, for we can no longer really stay ‘at home,’ but neither can we depart to some utopian realm beyond all patriarchal structures” (pp. 120–21). Ruth’s choice is neither romanticized nor made tragic. It is a determined and melancholic turning toward a life guided by imagination rather than acquisition.

In her essay, “Writers and the Nostalgic Fallacy,” Robinson offers this analogy: “among people carried along in a canoe toward a waterfall, the one who stands up and screams is not the one with the keenest sense of the situation. We are in a place so difficult that perhaps alarm is an indulgence, and a harder thing—composure—is required of us.”15 Aiming toward this “harder thing,” Robinson explains that she tries to avoid the sarcasm and scorn (a “secular contemptus mundi”) and the “simpler and simpler models of reality” that, for her, characterize much of contemporary American literature (“Writers,” 35).16 *Housekeeping* ends in a difficult place: Ruth may be composed but the waterfall is still rushing and nearby. If, in the end, the “perimeters” of Ruth and Sylvie’s “wandering are nowhere,” the perimeters of Ruth’s mourning are also nowhere (p. 219). In this way, *Housekeeping* is a paradigmatic suicidal text. It mourns a loss that cannot be forgotten or, as Weil says of creation itself, easily forgiven.17


9. Leslie Fieldler quotes Weil in the introduction to *Waiting*: “I am quite sure that there is a God in the sense that I am sure my love is no illusion. I am quite sure there is no God, in the sense that I am sure there is nothing which resembles what I can conceive when I say the word” (32).


16. Also see Robinson’s interview in *Contemporary Literature* (p. 236).

17. “If we forgive God for his crime against us, which is to have made us finite creatures, He will forgive our crime against him, which is that we are finite creatures” (*Notebooks*, pp. 94–95).